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THE BLAST-FURNACE

BY WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

AND such a night! But maybe in that mood
'Twas for the best; for he was like to brood—
And he could hardly brood on such a night
With that squall blowing, on this dizzy height
Where he caught every breath of it—the snow
Stinging his cheek, and melting in the glow
Above the furnace, big white flakes that fell
Sizzling upon the red-hot furnace bell:
And the sea roaring, down there in the dark,
So loud to-night he needn't stop to hark—
Four hundred feet below where now he stood.
A lively place to earn a livelihood—
His livelihood, his mother's, and the three
Young sisters', quite a little family
Depending on him now—on him, Jim Burn,
Just nineteen past—to work for them, and earn
Money enough to buy them daily bread
Already . . .

 And his father on the bed
Up-stairs . . . gey sudden . . .

Nay, he mustn't think:

But shove his trolley to the furnace brink,
And tip his load upon the glowing bell,
Then back again toward the hoist. 'Twas well
He'd work to stop him thinking. He was glad
His mate to-night was not a talky lad—
But Peter, mum-glum Peter, who would stare
With such queer sulky looks upon the flare
When round the dipping bell it shot up high
With roar and flourish into that black sky.
He liked to hear it roaring, liked to see
The great flame leaping skyward suddenly,
Then sinking slowly, as the bell rose up
And covered it again with red-hot cup,
When it would feed more quiet for a time
Upon the meal of ironstone and lime
He'd fetched it in his trolley . . .

Aye, and he,
Trundling his truck along that gallery
High in the air all night to keep it fed—
And all the while his father lying dead
Up-stairs—to earn a livelihood. 'Twas strange
To think what it all meant to him—the change . . .

And strange he'd never thought before how queer
It was for him, earning his bread up here
On this blast-furnace, perched on the cliff-top—
Four hundred feet or so, a dizzy drop,
And he'd be feeding fishes in the sea!
How loud it roared to-night, and angrily—
He liked to hear it breaking on the shore,
And the wind's threshing, and the furnace' roar:
And then the sudden quiet, a dead lull,
When you could only hear a frightened gull
Screeching down in the darkness there below,
Or a dog's yelp from the valley, or the snow
Sizzling upon hot iron. Queer, indeed,
To think that he had never taken heed
Before to-night, or thought about it all.

He'd been a boy till this, and had no call
To turn his mind to thinking seriously.
But he'd grown up since yesterday; and he
Must think a man's thoughts now—since yesterday
When he'd not had a thought but who should play
Full-back for Cleveland Rovers, now that Jack
Had gone to Montreal, or should he back
Old Girl or Cleopatra for the Cup.

In four-and-twenty hours he had grown up . . .
His father, sinking back there on the bed,
With glassy eyes and helpless lolling head . . .
The dropping jaw . . . the breath that didn't come,
Though still he listened for it, frozen numb . . .

And then, his mother . . . but he must not let
His mind run on his mother now. And yet
He'd often thought his father glum and grim.
He understood now. It was not for him,
His son, to breathe a word to her, when he,
Her husband, had borne with her patiently
Through all those years. Aye, now he understood
Much, since he hadn't his own livelihood

To think of only, but five mouths to feed—
And the oldest, the most helpless . . . He had need
To understand a little . . .

But to-night
He mustn't brood. . . . And what a golden light
The steady spurt of molten slag below
Threw up upon the snow-clouds—and the snow
Drifting down through it in great flakes of gold,
Melting to steam, or driven, white and cold,
Into the darkness on a sudden gust.
And how the cold wind caught him, as he thrust
His empty trolley back toward the hoist,
Straight from the sea, making his dry lips moist
With salty breath.

'Twas strange to-night, how he
Was noticing, and seeing suddenly
Things for the first time he'd not seen before,
Though he'd been on this shift at least a score
Of times. But things were different somehow. Strange
To think his father's death had wrought the change
And made him see things different—little things:
The sudden flashing of a sea-gull's wings
Out of the dark, bewildered by the glare;
And, when the flame leapt, mum-glum Peter's hair
Kindling a fierier red; the wind; the snow;
The unseen washing of the waves below
About the cliff-foot. He could almost see,
In fancy, breakers frothing furiously
Against the crumbling cliffs—the frantic spray
Leaping into the darkness, nigh half-way
Up the sheer height.

And now his thoughts dropt back
Into the valley, lying still and black
Behind him—and the mine where other men
Were toiling on their night shift, even then
Working the ironstone for daily bread,
Their livelihood. . . .

He saw the little red
Raw row of square brick houses—dark they'd be
And quiet now— Yet, plainly he could see
The street he lived in—aye, and Number Eight,
His father's house: the rusty iron gate;
The unkempt garden; and the blistered door;
The unwashed doorstep he'd not seen before,
Or, leastways, hadn't noticed; and the bell
That never rang, though he remembered well

His father'd tinkered it, times out of mind;
And in each window, a drawn yellow blind
Broken and grimy—and that blind, to-day
Drawn down for the first time. . . .

His father lay
In the front bedroom, quiet on the bed . . .
And he, upon his usual shift. . . .

She'd said,
His mother'd said, he shouldn't take his shift
Before the undertaker'd been to lift . . .
'Twas scarcely decent: that was what she said—
Him working, and his father lying dead,
And hardly cold. . . .

And she, to talk to him,
His son, of decency, there, with that grim
Half-smile still on her husband's cold white face!
He couldn't bide a moment in the place
Listening to her chat-chatter, knowing all
That he knew now. . . . But there, he had no call
To blame her, when his father'd never blamed.
He wondered in that room she wasn't shamed. . . .

She didn't understand. He understood,
Now he'd grown up; and had his livelihood,
And theirs, to earn. . . .

Lord, but that was a rare
Fine flourish the flame made, a bonnie flare
Leaping up to the stars! The snow had stopt:
He hadn't heeded: and the wind had dropt
Suddenly: and the stars were shining clear.
Over the furnace' roaring he could hear
The waves wash-washing; and could see the foam
Lifting and falling down there in the gloam . . .
White as his father's face. . . .

He'd never heard
His father murmur once—nay, not a word
He'd muttered: he was never one to blame.
And men had got to take things as they came.

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON.